

(September 17, 2007) City Club Speech on Transportation

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Congressman Dan Lipinski

City Club Speech on Transportation

Monday September 17, 2007

Almost a century ago, Carl Sandburg described Chicago as the "Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler." That's no less true today. But in addition to being a rail hub, Chicago is now also an aviation and highway hub. Transportation is - metaphorically and literally - what keeps our region moving.

From 1833 when Chicago was first incorporated as a town of 350 residents, to the robust metropolitan region of today with over 8 million people, transportation has played a key role in shaping Chicagoland.

In the mid-1800's, the Illinois & Michigan Canal and the Chicago & Galena Union Railroad began fueling the growth that transformed Chicago from a sleepy outpost town to the thriving metropolis we live in today.

all right here in our backyard. And in today's increasingly competitive global economy where time really does mean money for business, and where traffic congestion and delays cost us individually and as a region, our economy and quality of life are dependent on the state of our transportation system.

And with Chicago's bid to host the 2016 Olympics, the potential needs are growing. There is a need to invest in new projects, a need to maintain what we have, & a need to plan for the future today, instead of when it's too late.

While it may seem as though just yesterday we passed the last highway and transit reauthorization bill, SAFETEA-LU (Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users), Congress will soon begin work on the next funding bill. The current legislation which authorized \$286.5 billion will expire at the end of September 2009.

As the transportation hub of the nation, we are in a unique position. We need to plan for the future and start planning for the next highway bill now, so we can build regional consensus on our transportation needs, and put ourselves in the best standing for the reauthorization.

Because of this great local need, I asked the House Highways and Transit Subcommittee to hold the first congressional field hearing on the next highway funding bill right here in Chicago. I am pleased to announce here today that Chairman Peter DeFazio has agreed to hold this hearing in Chicago on October 29. This hearing will highlight our regional transportation system today, and focus on what our needs may be for the 2016 Olympics and beyond. This hearing will provide an excellent opportunity for Chicagoland to get a head start toward securing federal transportation funding in the next bill.

I understand the importance of transportation to our region. I learned it at the kitchen table. I learned it on the job when I interned as an inspector for Baker Engineering on the I-290 reconstruction project. I saw the difference transportation makes for working families in my neighborhood. I witnessed the revitalization of Midway Airport and the difference it

made to my neighborhood, our region, and our economy. And I remember the day the Orange Line opened and how happy people were to have an affordable and easy way to get to work downtown.

I learned that transportation has a direct impact on everyone's life on a daily basis, and on our economy.

Given how important transportation is to my district, the region, and the state, when I was elected to Congress in 2004, I made it a top priority to secure a seat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

As you probably know, the Transportation Committee writes the laws that dole out federal transportation funds and regulate every single mode of transportation in this country. In Congress, committees handle most of the legislative work, and to have seat on a committee, you have a seat at the table when legislation is being hammered out. And when the legislation deals with transportation, it becomes even more critical, especially for us in Chicagoland.

Despite my strong efforts to get on the committee, it didn't happen in my first term. However, I was still able to focus my efforts on the reauthorization of the surface transportation funding bill.

I was pleased to successfully secure over \$125 million for a variety of surface transportation projects in SAFETEA-LU, including a \$100 million earmark for the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program, also known as CREATE. This innovative rail modernization project will help alleviate the rail bottleneck in Chicagoland to help benefit commuters and businesses here and across the country. CREATE was one of only a handful of projects specifically designated by Congress in SAFETEA-LU as a project of national and regional significance.

Last September, I was joined by the CREATE partners - the Association of American Railroads, Illinois DOT, and Chicago DOT - and other federal, state, and local officials to announce a 3-year, \$330 million agreement to fund the first major phase of CREATE. This includes \$100 million in federal funds I secured in the highway bill, \$100 million from the railroads, a \$100 million commitment from the state, and a \$30 million commitment from the city.

CREATE is moving forward. The federal contribution and the railroad contribution are being used first since they are already available. Design and engineering work is being conducted, dirt is being turned, and funds are being spent. We need to show progress and results with this phase of CREATE, so we can be in the best position for additional federal funds in the next highway bill.

I believe the job of a public official is to get things done, and this is especially true when you deal with transportation policy. SAFETEA-LU was a textbook case of how bipartisan cooperation can get things done. As former U.S. DOT Secretary Norm Mineta said, there are no Democratic or Republican roads or bridges. Transportation is an issue that crosses ideological boundaries, and that's a good thing because states with a bipartisan congressional delegation like Illinois won out. (The bill passed the House by a vote of 417 to 9.) The Illinois congressional delegation worked hand in hand to do what was best for Illinois, and Illinois benefited - a 30 percent increase in highway funding and over \$1.2 billion in transportation earmarks.

Since I have mentioned earmarks a few times, I think that's something we should talk about a bit.

Let me tell you where I stand on legislative earmarks. I support them 100%.

I ask those who argue otherwise, would you rather have your local elected official helping decide where grants go, or would you rather have a Washington, DC bureaucrat who's never been to your neighborhood telling you that your grant application was denied? In fact, this happened just recently. In the current fiscal year, all of the earmarks were removed from the appropriations bills included in the Continuing Resolution, including transportation earmarks. So instead of spreading discretionary funds to important transportation projects across the country, bureaucrats in the U.S. Department of Transportation earmarked \$1.1 billion for congestion projects in ONLY five cities (New York City, San Francisco, Miami, Minneapolis, and Seattle), leaving Chicago and Illinois without any funding. This is what happens when you eliminate earmarks.

If we did not earmark, we would not have had the record \$832 million transit funding deal for the CTA and Metra in 2000. If we didn't earmark, we wouldn't have had the reconstruction of the Stevenson Expressway and Wacker Drive. If we didn't earmark, we would not have the MWRD's Tunnel and Reservoir Project or the Chicago Shoreline project.

Earmarks do good things so long as the projects are in the public interest and fully transparent. Earmarks have gotten a bad rap because of a few bad apples. Yes, it might be pork, but as that old saying goes: "one man's pork is another man's bacon".

As soon as I joined the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee earlier this year, under the leadership of Chairman Jim Oberstar of Minnesota - a cycling companion of mine, the Committee hit the ground running. We have a very ambitious agenda with a very aggressive timetable.

One of our first priorities was to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration and the Aviation Trust Fund. After many hearings of the Aviation Subcommittee, chaired by my good friend from downstate Jerry Costello, we passed H.R. 2881, the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2007. This bill would provide a total of \$66 billion over four years for FAA's capital programs and operations.

In addition, we also worked to authorize airports to increase the Passenger Facility Charge from \$4.50 to \$7.00. Nationally, it could raise in excess of an additional \$1 billion per year. PFCs were reauthorized by Congress in the early 1990s. Who gets credit for this is still debated. Some give the credit to a previous representative from my district, Peter DeFazio has also claimed it. As a junior member of the committee I can't disagree with my chairman. The 55% increase in PFCs in the FAA reauthorization could mean a dramatic increase in capital funds for airports in this region and more money for the O'Hare Modernization Program.

But the FAA bill isn't only about funding for capital projects or funding for FAA operations, it's also about R&D investments with an eye towards the future. It is also about committing federal resources to work on solving today's issues before they become tomorrow's problem.

I wrote a provision included in the bill that would establish an FAA Center of Excellence to research and develop alternative jet fuels. Emissions from aircraft account for roughly 3 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. However, analysts expect to see substantial increases in not only domestic air traffic, but especially worldwide air travel, so I believe it's something that we need to be proactive on. In fact, the European Union is instituting rules to require airlines to cut down on their green house gas emissions. Climate change is one of the most significant issues before us today, so if there's any way we can make a difference, I believe we should.

We are bringing the FAA Reauthorization bill to the floor of the House this week, but the Senate has not yet considered their version of the bill. So we still have a long road ahead of us before this becomes law. The current authorization expires by the end of the month, so we will likely have to pass a short-term extension to keep aviation funds flowing.

With the recent tragedy in Minnesota, Chairman Jim Oberstar has proposed a new national bridge trust fund to pay for reconstruction of bridges on our National Highway System. We have already held one hearing with another scheduled for later this month. While funding levels have not yet been determined, this could potentially mean billions of dollars in new funds for bridge reconstruction work.

Another significant priority this Congress will be Amtrak reauthorization. I believe that intercity passenger rail is a key component to a multimodal transportation system. Almost 20 years ago when I lived in Switzerland working on a contract with Swissair as a systems analyst, I was impressed by the rail system in Europe and took great advantage of it. While we do not have the same compactness of population in the U.S. that they have in Europe, we can still take much greater advantage of intercity rail transportation if we are willing to invest in it.

We also need to take a closer look at how the federal government can play a more effective role in expanding Amtrak service in states like Illinois, so regions like Rockford, the Quad Cities, and Peoria can get passenger rail service. This will not be an inexpensive proposition. A recent study by Amtrak estimated a \$32 million to \$55 million capital investment will be required for a new Chicago-Rockford-Dubuque, IA route.

But we must also keep an eye towards the future and plan accordingly. During travel in Europe I have ridden the TGV high speed rail system which is very impressive. We must look more closely at corridors in the Midwest where high speed rail can potentially be implemented. In TEA-21, Congress designated the Chicago Hub as a high speed rail corridor. While definitely a good step forward, it did not provide adequate funding to make the necessary investments to really bring about high speed rail. Illinois has done some good work on it along the Chicago-St. Louis corridor, but to really get high speed rail in the Midwest or for that matter, anywhere outside of the Northeast Corridor, I believe it will have to come down to increasing the federal role and federal funding.

When it comes to rail, I believe the federal government needs to do more. This year, I successfully included \$35 million in the House-passed FY 2008 Transportation Appropriations bill for the rail line relocation program authorized in SAFETEA-LU. This will be the first infusion of rail capital funds since the mid-1990s. This could be used for a wide range of rail capital projects, including grade separations and passenger rail-related projects.

And since we ought to look towards the future, in a short period of time, Congress will once again need to reauthorize the Highway Trust Fund. SAFETEA-LU only authorizes funding through federal fiscal year 2009, which ends September 30, 2009. While no firm decisions have been made yet, we will begin congressional hearings very soon and start crafting the legislation in early 2009.

With the groundwork being laid, the foundation being set, and the work beginning soon, I believe that this region must take this opportunity to shape our future not just by staying with the status quo and doing what we've been doing, but to propose ideas for change with an eye towards the future.

ISTEA, the 1991 highway and transit bill, authorized \$155 billion. TEA-21, the 1998 bill, authorized \$218 billion. SAFETEA-LU authorized \$285 billion. The next reauthorization could be well over \$300 billion in transportation funding.

Just as Mayor Daley has looked towards the future by leading our region with the bid to host the 2016 Olympics, we must apply the same visionary leadership to our regional transportation system. And with the prospect of the 2016 Olympics, Mayor Daley has publicly said that the key is transportation. I couldn't agree more.

We have to start planning for the future. We all know the issues. We all know the problems. What we need are good ideas on how the federal government can help keep Chicagoland moving, to help us prepare for the Olympics, and plan for the future of the region.

As I mentioned earlier, that is why I've called for the House Subcommittee on Highways and Transit to hold an October field hearing in Chicago on our regional transportation system needs for the 2016 Olympics and beyond.

Not only will this will be the first-ever Highway Subcommittee field hearing in Chicago, this will also be the first field hearing that will be used to prepare for the reauthorization of the highway and transit funding bill.

And just as the 1893 World's Fair put Chicago on the world's map and left a legacy in Chicago, I believe that the 2016 Olympics can leave an important transportation legacy here in Chicagoland. And with the upcoming reauthorization bill, the time to start planning is now.

Transportation is our history, and for this generation, it can be our legacy to the future as well.